Gilded or “Cordovan” Leather

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Of the various sorts of leather wall-hangings, the most glorious are those called “Cordovan.” The word “Cordovan” in modern times has come to have a meaning that has no bearing whatever on the old-time sumptuous art of Spain. It is a curious and unfortunate fact that so little is known of an art that held so high a place for many centuries, and it is still more lamentable that so fine a craft ever degenerated and finally died. There is some hope to be had from the experiments of modern workers that it may yet be revivified and come to a real renascence.

The golden glint, the richness of color, the fascinating variance of the texture, the wonderful durability and the fact that the age improves them, all combine to give these leathers a beauty and value that are unequalled by any other wall-hangings save tapestries. There are still large quantities of fine old leather hangings in existence, but it is sad that most of them have long ago been removed from their original homes, and are now in the hands of dealers and collectors, or in museums, or in the houses of wealthy Americans. The two countries where the leathers were made in largest quantity and finest quality, Spain and Italy, have both seen such unhappy days of poverty that little of it now remains in place to show the glory that once was theirs. In the one Venetian palace that yet has leather-covered walls, it is pathetic to discover that either the straightened circumstances of the family or the greed of caretakers has led to the disappearance of a neat square of leather behind each portrait hanging on the wall. A helpless shrug of the shoulder is the only reply to the amazement of the visitor.

“Gilded leather” is a somewhat misleading term, for there is no gold used in the whole process of making. The golden color comes from a transparent yellow varnish laid over silver-leaf. This is, on all accounts, an advantage over real gold: first, there is the obvious advantage of economy, and then the fact that the mellowing and deepening of the color of the varnish which age brings gives a softness and richness that can come in no other way, a quality by which many an old painting is glorified, and acquires a beauty beyond anything it had originally.

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The connoisseur or craftsman who would probe into the history of this wonderful work finds a disappointingly small amount of literature on the subject. There are many mentions of the leather, many items in the inventories of the personal property of ancient notables, but very little that gives an adequate idea of it as a craft. So far as I know, there are but two really helpful books on the subject in America. One is a portion of a volume belonging to a series, published in the last part of the eighteenth century, by the French Academy of Science. Unhappily, this is an account of the art in its decadence, almost in its very death, and so gives the various methods of cheapening and degrading the once honorable work. The other—and this is by far the most illuminating thing on the matter—is a small volume by Baron Charles Davillier, published in Paris in 1878, called "Notes sur les Cuirs de Cordoue.”

The origin of the industry is shrouded in mystery, but there seems to be reasonable certainty that it was introduced into Spain by the Moors before the eleventh century. The Spanish word for these leathers is "guadamacil," or varying forms like "guadamecil," "guadamaci" or "guadameci." It is by this name that Baron Davillier traces the ancestry of the leather back to an African village, on the edge of the Sahara, called Ghadames. He quotes a twelfth century writer of Tunis who speaks of the already famous leather from Ghadames ("cuir ghadâmesien"). The etymology certainly seems most reasonable, since the Spanish Moors were formerly African Moors.

However this may be, from the fourteenth through the sixteenth century, this leather work was one of the chief industries of Spain, giving great commercial importance and renown to Cordova, Barcelona and Seville, and furnishing livelihood to scores of lesser Spanish towns. The Cordovan workers especially became so well known that leather work of this kind was thenceforward called "Cordovan.” A sixteenth century author of Cordova,* writing upon the gilded leather industry, says that it “brings great wealth to the city, and gives to the principal streets a beautiful aspect. As the leathers are exposed to the sun, now gilded, now

*Ambrosio de Morales, 1575.
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colored and tooled, and as they are spread upon great tables to dry, truly it is a beautiful sight to see the streets thus hung in such splendor and variety."

Almost the only definite information as to just how this work was done is contained in the following quaint extract, quoted by Baron Davillier, from a French translation of an Italian account of the work, published in the "Specchio Universale," in Venice in 1564. Being thus twice translated, doubtless much is lost in both substance and accuracy, but the modern craftsman who would learn the secrets of the glorious old industry must be truly grateful for even this meagre account:

"The Art of Gilding Leather, and How it is Done.—He who discovered the art of gilding leather was surely a remarkable man, and one of rare judgment. I do not believe, and shall never believe that one man alone invented it and brought it to the perfection which we see to-day, and I believe that it originated in Spain, for the best work here was brought from that country. Great people own much of it, and it is frequently seen at Rome, at Naples, in Sicily, at Bologna, and in France, Spain and other places. And because it is of great importance and worthy to be described, I am disposed to set forth the order and manner of making it, although I do not believe that any but the best workman could do that properly. Here, then, is the method of doing it: Take the skins from which the shoemakers make shoes; place them in clear water for the space of one night, and then beat them all, one after the other, on a stone to soften them well; then wash them thoroughly and take them from the water. This done, it is necessary to have a polished stone, larger than the skin; draw the skin well over it with an iron made for the purpose, and let it dry thoroughly. Then take some glue, made from clippings of parchment, and spread it well over the skin with the hands, and then take silver leaf, and cover all over the skin, and hang on a cord to dry; afterwards, nail it to a wooden table to dry entirely. Then take it off, and cut away the part that is not silvered, and burnish it on the stone with a burnisher made of hematite or blood-stone, till it becomes brilliant. That done, it is necessary to have a block, cut from wood in the pattern in which one wishes to make the leather, and to have
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ink made of sandarac and lamp-black, and spread it with even strokes on the block. Then place the leather under the block and print it, and having printed it, let it dry. Afterward, nail it to a table and give it the varnish which makes the golden color. This is made from four parts linseed oil, two parts resin and one part aloes, boiled together till it becomes the color of gold. Spread the varnish on with the fingers, as I have directed.” (In the volume referred to above, published by the French Academy of Science, directions are given for applying the varnish with the fingers, by using the finger-tips as a brush, and drawing them in wavy lines over the silver surface. The varnish is then spread to an even coat by a skilful beating with the palms of the hands. The naive remark is added that the craftsman who uses his fingers for a brush has the advantage of economy as well as having his tools always with him and ready for use.) “According as the workman wishes to show silver or gold, he scrapes away the varnish from the silver part with a knife. When the skins are dry, they are painted, if desired, and then decorated by square irons. The pieces are made true and are sewed together, and in this way, the work is achieved. This is an art of great profit and learning, by means of which one makes friends with great personages, for the larger part of those who use this are illustrious and great men, of the opinion that this is an art of great beauty and most delightful to behold; it is also very profitable for those who make it, and it is called ‘the golden art,’ not without cause, for to work in gold and silver makes wealthy those who do it, provided they conduct themselves as they should.”

If the ancient writer’s conclusion is true, it must be that the modern craftsmen have not conducted themselves as they should.

This brief recipe is enticing in its simplicity and directness, but the carrying of it out is anything but simple and direct, and is the despair of even a hopeful worker.

The industry spread rapidly from country to country,—from Spain to Italy, where in Venice, perhaps as fine work was done as ever came from Spain, then to France, and then to the Netherlands and to England. In Paris, a whole quarter of the city was devoted to the work. In Valladolid, there is to this day a street called
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"calle de Guadamacileros." Large quantities of the leather were exported from Spain to the Spanish American Colonies. It has long been a cherished hope of the writer sometime to hunt the untravelled ways of Mexico and the West Indies to find if some of these indications of former grandeur are not still remaining.

The best work was done in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, and then, like many other crafts, it degenerated and finally died out entirely before the dawn of the nineteenth century. The account published by the French Academy of Science makes mention of various attempts to cheapen and quicken the process, all of them bound to be unsuccessful, for, just as at the present day, worthy handicraft required good materials intelligently and conscientiously wrought by an able man. Tin or brass was used in place of silver leaf, with disastrous effect, for the tin foil blackened in two or three years, and the brass accumulated verdigris; the tooling was carelessly done, the colors used were muddy and cheap, the leather was carelessly tanned. Sheep-skin was used in place of goat, and altogether, the art in its decay, presented a sorry appearance, when compared with the work of the great period, when standards were high and the industrial conditions favorable. In all the work there is great choice, as would be but natural, being the product of many individual hands, varying, of course, in skill and devotion. In the finest instances, the tooling is clear and crisp, giving an unsurpassed beauty and charm of texture. In less good work, it was vague and ineffectual, and added little quality to the work.

There was a very beautiful sort of gilded leather made that was not tooled at all, but was embossed and painted. It was a later production than the tooled leather. The pattern was made by the imprint of a wooden block, carved in relief, upon the dampened leather after the silvering was done. This was done by a hand press. The Dutch did especially beautiful work of this sort. The finest specimens of tooled leather are those where the pattern is printed in one color—or at least very few colors, whereas the embossed leather permits the widest range of color, and in many cases, gains thereby.

There have been several attempts in Europe, and at least two in America, to imitate the fine old tooled leather by machinery.
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Such efforts must always fail, for no machine can give the spirit and vitality of hand tooling. The modern work also has shown the fatal error of imitating the effects of time. The result has been merely to dim, and not to glorify the color. The embossed leather lends itself far better to modern machine production, for if a pattern be well designed and the block or roller well modelled, and if afterward the colors be painted on with taste and skill, the result may be moderately satisfactory. However, no truly great work of this kind can be expected to come from the modern factory system. The beauty of the old work corresponds exactly with the relative justice of industrial conditions and the freedom and responsibility of the craftsman. Baron Davillier gives some very enlightening extracts from the old rules of the Spanish gilds, that give one a vivid realization as to the difference between the conditions of ancient and modern craftsmanship. The following are selections from some of these regulations:

"Ordenanzas de Sevilla, 1502.—First, we order and decree that each year, on the day of St. John the Baptist, all members, or a majority of them, shall come together, and that in their meeting they shall name two artizans of the said handicraft as inspectors; after they have been thus elected, they shall conduct them before the 'Chapitre de la Cité,' to receive from them the solemn oath required in such cases: and this under a penalty of two thousand maravedis, etc.

"Item.—We order and decree that after to-day no artisan of the said handicraft shall open shop in this city, without having been previously examined by the inspectors of said handicraft, who shall inquire if he knows how to design a 'brocado,' (a term often used for gilded leather) and to cut the pattern according to standard; if he knows how properly to place the colors on the ground, for gold or for silver; if he knows how to gild well and perfectly as becomes a craftsman; if he knows also how to use the irons (tools) and to do it according to usage and custom. If this is not the case, he shall not be permitted to open shop, but if the said inspectors find him sufficiently skilful, they shall bring him before us that we may acknowledge him a master of said handicraft, and give to him a certificate with permission henceforth to practise said handi-
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craft. Otherwise he shall not keep his shop, under penalty of two thousand maravedis and the loss of his work."

It is interesting to note that while these regulations were issued by the city authorities, the decisions for or against the craftsmen were made by their own elected representatives.

"Item.—We order and decree that the skins worked by the artisans of said handicraft shall come from an animal freshly killed, and not dead from disease, and if other skins are used, they shall be set apart as false, and acknowledged as such, under penalty of six hundred maravedis.

"Item.—We order and decree that henceforward none of the said craftsmen, nor any one representing them, shall be so bold as to use the skin of an animal too young, be it for cushions or altar frontals, or any purpose whatsoever, on pain for the first offense, of losing the work thus done, and staying fifteen days in prison, and for the second offense, the penalty will be doubled; for the third offense, the same penalty, together with exclusion from the aforesaid handicraft.

"Item.—We order and decree that no one shall be so bold as to use skins badly joined together; but they must be well sewed on all sides, under penalty of six hundred maravedis, and nine days in prison, for the first offense, and for the second offense the same penalty, together with the loss of the seized work.

"Item.—We order and decree that all work which does not appear clean and clear after the impression from the block, shall not be sold without first having been submitted to us, in order that we may decide what is just, on penalty for the first offense, of losing the work or its value, for the second offense the same penalty with fifteen days in prison, and for the third offense, the same penalty with exclusion from the handicraft."

As early as 1316 account is found in Barcelona of two "guadamacileros," who were members of the municipal council, a plain indication of the importance of the craft in the life of the town. By 1539 more or less disorder and fraud had crept into the industry, "due to the lack of inspectors and the absence of rules for examination, and the poor work resulting from incapacity or bad faith."

This meant a distinct detriment to the commerce of the city. To
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remedy the situation, the municipal magistrate issued the following ordinances:

"First, within the city of Barcelona, no person shall exercise the handicraft of 'guadamacilero,' without having first passed an examination, and those who already have an open shop must submit to an examination within two months, on penalty of closing the shop. The examination should take place in the house of the brotherhood of Saint Etienne, or at the house of one of their experts. The operation and experiments to be made by the member-elect are specified, whether it be to color the skins or to stamp the gold or silver; the Corporation furnishes the necessary materials to those who have not means to procure them for themselves. The fee for the examination, fifteen sous, is for the benefit of the Brotherhood. The sons of masters are exempt."

Then a three years' apprenticeship with a master is ordered by the town authorities, and a certificate from the master is required. As in Seville, it was forbidden to use the skin of very young animals, to use tin or pewter instead of silver leaf, and the annual election of two representative inspectors was provided for. In case of falsity in the work, these inspectors, together with three other experts gave their decision, and if it was adverse, the work was burned, according to the general custom of the handicrafts of Barcelona.

The stringency of all the foregoing regulations is astonishing to the modern workman, who, generally speaking, is responsible to no one but his employer, who, in turn, is responsible to no one but his customers, and if his wares be merely good enough to sell, no further questions are asked.

Whether or not the time will ever come when we shall have a society so ordered that craftsmen are spurred to good work by any such method as this, we may still gain much help toward a solution of the future problems of handicraft, by a careful study of past conditions and past work.

The criticism has many times been made that this is not a craft worth reviving, since gilded leather is distinctly a luxury, and could only be bought by the very wealthy; that it smacks of royalty and state apartments and the like; and has small place in a democratic
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country. However, there are so many public and semi-public places where so glorious and permanent a wall-covering would be right and proper, that there seems to be a real place in modern life for the "guadamacilero." State-houses, city-halls, perhaps hotels and theatres, surely churches, schools and libraries, and assembly rooms of many kinds, offer most appropriate opportunity for the use of gilded leather wall-hangings, along with mural paintings and tapestries.

That they last for centuries, with always increasing beauty as the years roll on, makes them one of the most fitting wall-coverings for public buildings.

There are, at present, preserved in the Cluny Museum, Paris, examples from the best period, which were discovered in an ancient house in Rouen, whose interior fittings and furniture had fallen to complete decay from dampness; the leathers alone being in perfect condition beneath the mould.

IT IS BY WORKING WITHIN LIMITS THAT THE ARTIST REVEALS HIMSELF

GOETHE